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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging fears of electronic church critics that audiences will adopt the conservative political messages espoused by evangelical broadcasters, a study was conducted to determine the political and social issues that best predict attendance to religious broadcasts. A secondary analysis was conducted of existing data from a statewide telephone survey of residents of Alabama. Interviewees in the survey were questioned about political beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge; race relations; religious orientation; media use; and demographic information. A pool of 20 items dealing with political and social issues, political anomie, and racial attitudes was selected for possible use as predictor variables in the discriminant analysis. The results of the analysis indicated that fundamentalist issues, political distrust, political power, and political knowledge tended to be the areas of distinction between viewers and nonviewers of religious broadcasts. Viewers tended to be more opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment, pornography, and abortion than did nonviewers. Viewers also favored prayer in school and gun control more strongly than did nonviewers. There appeared to be a sense of political estrangement among viewers, who found politics and government more complicated and legislators losing touch with them. At the same time, viewers had a greater sense that political power wielded at the ballot box is the only way of controlling the political process. Nonviewers tended to exhibit greater political knowledge than did viewers. (HTH)

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POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES AS PREDICTORS OF ATTENDING TO RELIGIOUS BROADCASTS

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POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES AS PREDICTORS OF ATTENDING TO RELIGIOUS BROADCASTS

The religious broadcasting audience has, until recently, been largely ignored by media researchers. Gaddy (1981) listed eight studies prior to his own of religious broadcast audiences. This lack combined with the increasing visibility of religious broadcasting has spurred an increased interest in this area with more work continuing. However, many of these studies have focused on the demographic characteristics of the religious broadcast audience without much concern for the audience's opinion on political and social issues. This lack is surprising in light of the concern of many individuals over the political impact of some of the religious broadcasts (e.g., Apple, 1982; Hahn & Wiesner, 1982). The present study uses a secondary analysis of an existing data base to examine the political and social issues which separate religious broadcast attenders from nonattenders.

The value of understanding people's social/political beliefs became more salient as broadcast evangelists began to preach on social issues and to enter directly into the realm of political activity. Although Clark (1981) argues that "the electronic church is a highly diverse group of religious broadcasters representing many distinct Protestant traditions" (p. 2), Chandler (1982) suggests that common philosophical/political positions run through the message of religious

broadcasters involved in social/political activism. Chandler cites the issues of abortion, busing, homosexuality, pornography, sex education in the public schools, easy divorce and the old Equal Rights Amendment as issues which are opposed and prayer in public schools, the teaching of creationism, community censorship of textbooks, capital punishment, traditional family, a strong national defense and increased support for Isreal as issues which are supported by those religious broadcasters who frequently comment on political issues.

Critics of the electronic church fear the audiences will adopt the political messages. An alternative view, which does not seem to have been explored, is that attenders share the electronic minister's political/social views before becoming attenders. If the latter explanation is the case, fear of political suasion by attenders should be lessened. If the former, concern over political suasion wrapped in religious messages becomes a potential issue. With the state of present audience research dealing primarily in demographics, little evidence is extant to provide a picture of the political/social views of those who attend to religious broadcasts. The lack of information about their views makes resolution of the above question impossible.

The present study attempts to provide evidence for this debate. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, hypotheses were eschewed in favor of a single research question:

Q_1 What political and social issues best predict attendance to religious broadcasts?

The use of discriminant analysis provides a means by which the research question may be partially answered. Through discriminant analysis, predictor function(s) may be derived which allow for

prediction of an individual's placement into a specific group by her/his response on the items which comprise the function.

METHOD

To answer the research question, a secondary analysis of an existing data set was undertaken. Data was obtained from a statewide survey of residents of the State of Alabama conducted by the Capstone Poll. The Capstone Poll is a public opinion research organization operated jointly by the Center for Administrative and Policy Studies and the Communication Research and Service Center of the University of Alabama. The poll conducts both proprietary as well as academic opinion polls. General statewide surveys are conducted semi-annually by Capstone Poll in order to assess political and communication trends in the State. The data for this study was taken from the general statewide survey conducted during the last week in May and the first week in June, 1981.

Capstone Poll uses a two-stage random digit dialing procedure to obtain a sample from all individuals owning telephones in Alabama. The person selected for interviewing at a given number is systematically controlled in order to obtain a representative mix of age and sex. Five-hundred and ninety interviews were conducted (225 males, 355 females, 10 unknown), of those, 502 were sufficiently complete for initial inclusion in this analysis. Interviewees were questioned about political beliefs, political movement, political anomie, voting behavior, political knowledge, race relations, political identification, religious orientation, media use, and standard demographic information by professional interviewers.

Average length of time for completion of the items was 21 minutes.

The demographic composition of the sample of 502 broken out by sex (male n=198, female n=304, race (black n=103, white=39$), and age (18-26 n=78; 27-35 n=35; 36-44 n=108; 45-53 n=69; 54-62 n=68; 63-98 n=87, unknow n=57) reveals that males are underrepresented as are the 27-35 age group and the 36-44 age group appears overrepresented. A breakdown of the sample by religion showed a Baptist predomination comparison 60% of the sample. The next largest groups, in descending order, are Methodists (12.4%), Church of Christ (7.8%), Catholic (6%), Presbyterian (5.2%), Holiness (2.4%), and Episcopalian (2.2%).

Variables

A pool of 20 items dealing with political and social issues, political anomie, and racial attitudes was selected for possible use as predictor variables in the discriminant analysis. The 20 item pool utilized a four-point, forced-choice, Lickert-like scale--strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. The 20 items are attached as Appendix A.

In addition to the 20 items, a political knowledge scale was constructed using five questions: (1) Was President Eisenhower a Republican or a Democrat; (2) How long a term does the governor of Alabama serve; (3) How long a term does a U. S. Senator serve; (4) Who is the Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives; and (5) Who is the governor of Alabama? A correct response was scored as a one and an incorrect or "don't know" was scored as a zero. Possible scores for the scale ranged from zero to five.

The two groups of cases between which this study attempts to

distinguish are those individuals who attend to religious broadcast messages and nonattenders. To operationalize these two groups, the answer to the question "Do you frequently, sometimes, rarely, or never watch or listen to religious programs on television or radio?" Those who responded either frequently or sometimes were grouped as attenders. Those individuals who responded rarely or never were grouped as nonattenders.

Statistical Procedures

All data analyses were performed using SPSS (Nie et al., 1975) subprograms FREQUENCIES and DISCRIMINANT. Stepwise analysis using Rao's V was implemented to select the most useful items for the disciminant analysis computation. The criterion level was set at $p.<05$.

RESULTS

The stepwise discriminant analysis selected 11 items from the pool of 21 in 11 steps. Table 1 lists the items and indicates the step each was selected, each item's Wilkes Lambda coefficient, and Rao's V for each step. These 11 items produced one canonical discriminant function providing a moderate amount of separation (Wilkes Lambda=.7478, Canonical Correlation=.5021) which is significant beyond p=.0001. One function is the largest theoretically possible number of disciminant functions for a two group problem since the maximum possible number of functions is controlled by the number of groups minus one.

The standardized canonical discriminate function coefficients

indicates the relative importance of each item to disciminating between the two groups. Prayer in public schools (.5147) had the highest coefficient, followed by elimination of X rated movies and adult bookstores (.3676), the federal government improving the social and economic position of blacks and minorities (.3396), Congressional representative quickly lose touch with the people (-.3180), people don't have any say in the government (.2645), political knowledge (.2536), the government is to complicated to understand (-.2509), better gun control (.2022), abortions are a private matter and shouldn't be regulated by the government (-.1764), anti-ERA (.1678), and political activity by blacks would lead to fewer poor blacks (.1627).

As a test for the ability of the function to actually discriminate between the two groups, the subprogram DISCRIMINANT classifies the cases into groups based on the function. This classification is then compared to the actual classification given by the respondent. The use of the 11 item function will correctly classifies 75.8% of the nonattenders and 71.4% of the attenders. Overall, the function correctly classifies 74.6% of all cases.

DISCUSSION

A combination of fundamentalist issues, political distrust, political power, and political knowledge tend to be the areas of distinction between the attenders and nonattenders to religious broadcasts. On fundamental issues, an examination of the group means (see Table 2) reveal that attenders of religious broadcasts tend to be more opposed to the ERA, X rated movies and adult book stores, and

abortion than nonattenders. Attenders tend to favor more strongly prayer in school and more gun control than nonattenders. This pattern of response seems to follow the political ideology of most of the broadcast evangelists who have begun speaking out on political issues (e.g., James Robison, Jerry Falwell, Jim Baker, and Pat Robertson) and cited earlier by Chandler (1982). The somewhat surprising finding was the higher mean which indicated a greater desire for stricter gun control on the part of the attenders.

There seems to be a sense of political estrangement. This feeling is reflected in attenders seeming to find politics and government more complicated and Congressmen losing touch with the people more frequently than nonattenders. At the same time there is a sense that political power wielded at the ballot box is the only way of controlling the process. This seems to be indicated by the attenders greater agreement than nonattenders that political activity by blacks will decrease their poverty, that the vote is the only source of personal political power, and that the federal government should do all it can to help blacks and minorities. The last finding seems to be somewhat at variance with the general tone taken with the fundamentalist issues. In part, this finding may be due to the presence of blacks in the sample who would presumably endorse more strongly a call for help from the federal government. In addition, the political temperament towards increasing taxes and providing few social services to the people is prevalent in Alabama. This lack of state services may inspire many people looking to the federal government to supply necessary help.

Political knowledge was a construct comprised of responses to

five questions. Nonattenders tended to do better than attenders. Political knowledge is probably closely associated with the sense of political alienation and political power discussed above. The greater the political knowledge, the greater the options available to exert personal influence on the political system. This knowledge would reduce the distancing that seems to be indicated by these data.

The fairly high success rate in correctly classifying cases into the appropriate group suggests attenders and nonattenders separate along these lines. Thus, these issues may be seen as areas of contention between those people who attend to religious broadcasts and those who do not. The areas of contention may be areas of friction which seem to have developed between fundamentalist broadcast evangelists and "main line" churches.

While the results of the present study would seem to be reliable for the State of Alabama, caution is urged when attempting to generalize to other states. This pattern of response may not hold true for the northeast or the west where the general religious composition is not so heavily Baptist.

The present study has suggested a discriminant function which can correctly classify an individual as being an attender or nonattender of religious broadcasts 75% of the time. The religious attenders have been seen to differ from nonattenders on items dealing with fundamentalist issues, political anomie, political power, and political knowledge.

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Table 1

Selected Items for the Discriminant Function

Step	Item	Lambda	Rao's V
1	School prayer	.8637	.312+.002
2	Washington help blacks & minorities	.8335	.3956+002
3	Eiiminate X rated movies	.8082	.4699+002
4	Elected representatives lose touch	.7947	.5115+002
5	More gun control	.7814	.5538+002
6	Political knowledge	.7725	.5833+002
7	No say in government	.7674	.6002+002
8	Gov't shouldn't control abortions	.7620	.6185+002
9	Government is too complicated	.7563	.6381+002
10	Anti-ERA	.7518	.6524+002
11	Blacks voting means less poor blacks	.7478	.6676+002

Table 2

Means for Attenders and Nonattenders on the Selected Items

Item	Attenders	Nonattenders
Prayer in public schools	1.9167	2.5000
Washington helps blacks & minorities	2.2500	2.5357
Eliminate X rated movies	1.9583	2.4821
Elected representatives lose touch	2.1944	2.0536
More gun control	2.3403	2.6429
Political knowledge	3.0208	3.6607
No say in government	2.6042	2.7500
Government shouldn't control abortions	2.2014	1.8571
Government is too complicated	2.1736	2.3036
Anti-ERA	2.4722	2.6786
Blacks voting means less poor blacks	2.5694	2.7321

On a scale with Strongly Agree=1 to Strongly Disagree=4.

Appendix A

List of Pool Items Taken from Capstone Survey

1. The proposed Equal rights Amendment to the Constitution should be defeated.*
2. Sex education courses taught by qualified teachers should be offered to students in all public schools.
3. The public schools should conduct prayers as part of their official business.*
4. The government should due whatever is necessary to eliminate all pornography such as X-rated movies and pornographic bookstores.*
5. The United States should increase spending for military defense.
6. A homosexual person who is a well qualified teacher, has as much right to a job in the public schools as anyone else.
7. The country would be better off if we had good gun control laws.*
8. Achieving racial integration is so important that it justifies busing children to schools out of their own neighborhoods.
9. The public schools should teach students that the universe was created by God as described in the Bible.
10. Whether to have an abortion is a strictly private decision, which the government should not try to regulate in one way or another.*
11. The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally word for word.
12. If blacks were more politically active, fewer blacks would be poor.*
13. I don't think that public officials care much what people like me think.

14. Voting is the only way that people like me have any say about what government does.

15. People like me don't have any say about what government does.*

16. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.*

17. Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly.*

18. Parties are only interested in people's votes--not in their opinions.

19. Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that the government in Washington should make every possible effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks and other minority groups?*

20. Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that it is a good thing for the country that blacks are now allowed to vote?

* Denotes item selected for use in the discriminant analysis.